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Agrarian Distress in Bidar

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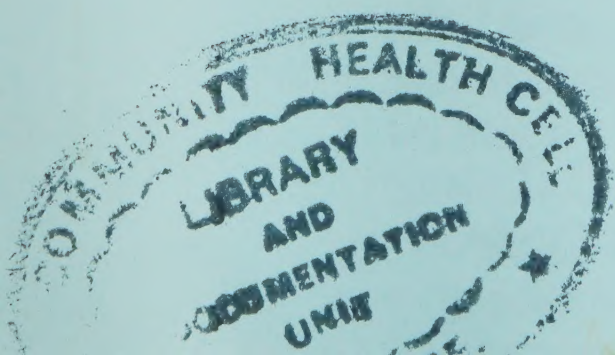
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All ideas and views expressed in this report are mine and do not represent the views of the institute with which I am affiliated.

A R Vasavi



Suicides as Symptomatic of Agrarian Distress

Between December 1997 and May 1998 twenty-three cases of suicides related to agricultural crop loss were reported from the north Karnataka districts of Bidar and Gulbarga. Of these, thirteen suicides were by agriculturists in the district of Bidar, and a significant proportion of these was from Bhalki taluka. Though this study was initiated in response to reports of suicides in the district, the study does not focus on the actual cases/households in which distress-related suicides were reported.¹ Rather, the study considers the suicides to be symptomatic of larger and more pervasive crises in the region. The *crises* are *ecological, economic, and social*; each inter-linked with the other, and combining to produce distress in the region. And it is in the

¹Fieldwork for this study was conducted between August 22-30th 1998. Dr. P.K Shetty of NIAS was also a member of the team and has focussed on the ecological dimensions of the issue (see his report, NIAS R6-99 for details). Due to the sensitivity of the issues we did not interview many of the families in which there had been suicides. All these families had already been subject to scrutiny by the press, local and state administrators and enquiry committee members. Details of the villages visited are available in Appendix I.

context of these crises that the pervasive distress in the region and the suicides by agriculturists must be understood².

An Ecological Crisis

The promotion of commercial agriculture, based on the utilisation of hybrid seeds, chemical fertilisers and pesticides, in a pre-dominantly semi-arid region has had several repercussions. There is the loss of land-race seeds as the cultivation of commercial/cash crops displaces the cultivation of local crops. Linked to the use of increased amounts of fertilisers and pesticides there is the depletion of soil fertility and the increase in crop susceptibility to pests and diseases. As a whole, there is a lack of fit between the ecological specificity of the region and commercial agricultural practices. Climatic changes, especially that of changes in the rainfall pattern since the past two years (1997-98), that are drastic and unexpected, compound these conditions, thereby, further subjecting agriculture to an ecological crisis.

An Economic Crisis

Though commercial agriculture is promoted on the bases of the utilisation of external inputs, institutional credit facilities

² In writing this report I have drawn on my field and research experiences in Bijapur district, which in many ways is similar to that of Bidar. Details of my research on Bijapur are available in my book, *Harbingers of Rain: Land and Life in South India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1999.

to purchase these inputs are available only to a limited number of agriculturists (mostly large landowners). Most agriculturists incur heavy debts in order to engage in commercial agriculture. Small and marginal cultivators for whom institutional credit is not readily or easily available resort to non-institutional debts at heavy interest rates in order to take to modern cultivation or to remain in cultivation. In times of ecological crises, such as an outbreak of pests or diseases, agriculturists incur more debts (from private creditors and from agri-business agents) to purchase pesticides. As crops are lost, due to both deficit and unseasonal rains and the outbreak of pests, several agriculturists are left with large debts, the re-payment of which is beyond the immediate ability of many. As an increasingly commercial activity, agriculture increases the vulnerability of small and marginal agriculturists and provides no safety net (either locally or from the government) in which to rely on during periods of crises.

A Social Crisis

The introduction of commercial agriculture in a predominantly dry agriculture belt has its impact on the social fabric of the region. Commercial agriculture itself forces agriculturists to submit to the prescriptions of the agricultural extension service, the market, the agri-business agencies and credit institutions and agents. Agriculture is no longer drawn on the established principles of local knowledge and caste and kin-based ties.

Instead, agriculture is a form of livelihood, to engage in which individual agriculturists depend primarily on their household and family support. As agriculture becomes an externally prescribed form of economic activity there are problems in the dissemination of knowledge, in the conduct of actual agricultural activities and in the understanding and management of situations such as crop loss.

The denouement of such conditions that can be identified as triple crises in the region necessitates that we raise several questions. What factors (economic, political, social and cultural) have combined to produce such conditions? What roles have the key agencies and agents of the government/state, the market/capital, and community played in this context? Who is responsible for the utter degradation of life conditions in this region? Who have been the victims and who have gained?

Some answers to these questions may lie in understanding the general background of the region, the altered agricultural patterns and the socio-economic trends in the region.

State Presence and Absence in a Marginal Area

In geo-physical terms Bidar district is part of the semi-arid and drought-prone belt of northern Karnataka and has been susceptible to periodic droughts. Though some 82 percent of

the total land are cultivated, only eight (8) percent of its total cultivable area is irrigated and the state's efforts to provide irrigation have been lackadaisical. The two major irrigation projects, Karanja started in 1963 and Chulkinala started in 1972, are yet to be completed. Only 2097 hectares are irrigated by canals and tanks, while the rest, of about 30892 hectares, are irrigated by wells and tube wells. The state of incompleteness and disrepair (of the little that has been completed) of the two large irrigation projects are telling comments on the extent of state support for the region.³

Compounding the lack of development of infrastructure in the region is the de-industrialization that has set in since the independence and re-organisation of states period. Though once a home to many cottage industries, such as cotton and oil-ginning mills,⁴ there are now few industries that draw on local raw materials or skills. Even the well-known form of local handicrafts, *bidri* ware, is in a state of decline. Increasing prices of materials, especially silver, and declining sales have meant that many of the hereditary artisans are no longer employed in the production of such ware. Literacy levels are also below the state levels and currently only 45 percent of the total population are literate.⁵

³All data compiled from District Statistical Outline [1996-97] (Karnataka Government); District Gazetteer (Karnataka Government); and NABARD, "Potential Linked Plan: Bidar/ Annual PLP for 1997-98" NABARD, Bangalore Regional Office. 1996.

⁴Bidar District Gazetteer, Govt. Printing Press, Bangalore, 1977.

⁵District Statistical Outline [1996-97].

A drought-prone district with little or no irrigation facilities and no alternative economic opportunities, Bidar has remained in a state of continual poverty and mass deprivation. State assessments itself indicate that since the 1960s there has been little or no change in its conditions of “backwardness” measured by indices of literacy, economic development, productivity, infrastructure etc. In 1961, the district ranked as the second lowest in terms of development and by 1969 it was ranked as the lowest in the state⁶. That the conditions of “backwardness” in economic and social criteria persist is evident in the fact that in 1971 the district was assessed to be the “least developed district” in the state.⁷ This continues to the present where Bidar with its average annual income of Rs 4242 (for 1992-93 prices) ranks 19th out of 21 districts in the state in terms of per capita income.⁸

Agricultural Interventions

Agriculture in Bidar had had its own specific form. Drawing on the specificities of the local ecology, agriculture was mostly dry cultivation or rain-dependent cultivation in which a wide variety of local sorghum⁹ (*jola*, the staple grain) was grown in

⁶ Bidar District Gazetteer, 1977. Government Press. Bangalore.

⁷ Ibid., page 305.

⁸ NABARD, Bidar District, Potential Linked Plan, 1996.

⁹ In our interviews with agriculturists in three villages we gathered that more than thirty types of sorghum had been grown in the district. Some of the varieties that they listed were *Kemp jola*, *Sherkhande*, *Dudmangare*, *Sakrejola*, *Kanmuchike*, *Jingari*, *Haladi*, *Maldandi*, *Mussoli*, *Billi Jola* etc.

combination with pulses, oil seeds, wheat and other cereals. Though cultivation was restricted to two periods (*rabi* or winter cultivation (August-January, and *kharif* or summer cultivation from June-September), care was taken to cultivate green manure crops of *Sannhemp* and *Diancha*.¹⁰ The cultivation and use of such manure crops helped agriculturists retain the fertility of the soil, decreased the chances of external pests and diseases entering the fields, and enabled agriculturists to be self-reliant for a very significant agricultural input. Even by 1970s little commercial or inorganic manure and fertilisers were used.¹¹

But the agriculture of Bidar, like that of many other semi-arid regions which produced dry cereals, was considered to be “low productive” and has been subject to a variety of “development programmes” that have drawn, largely, on the agenda of the Green Revolution. Drawing on programmes and policies that emphasise the need to increase agricultural productivity, the state has promoted a model of agriculture in the region that draws primarily on the model of agriculture developed for wet regions and for commercial cultivation.

In 1966-67, high-yielding varieties of seeds for sorghum, paddy, wheat and sugarcane were introduced.¹² Gradually

¹⁰*Sannhemp* is called pundi and is a versatile green bush/shrub the leaves of which make for a nutritious vegetable and the dried stems make good rope.

¹¹Bidar District Gazetteer, 1977.

¹²Bidar District Gazetteer, 1977; p 150.

between the late 1960s and mid 1970s hybrid varieties of seeds for other crops such as cotton, pulses and sunflower were introduced. Between 1972-74 the region was subject to a prolonged drought and scarcity conditions prevailed in the region. Government intervention in the immediate period saw to the provisioning of relief to people and cattle. But, after the end of the drought and scarcity conditions the district became part of a scheme to promote pulse cultivation.

The cultivation of *tur* or *toghri* [red gram] as a commercial crop became the primary agricultural agenda in the region. A significant proportion of land once under multi-crops and dry cultivation (especially sorghum, wheat and oil-seeds) has now been dedicated to the cultivation of pulses, especially that of *kadle* (Bengal gram), and *tur* (see Table I for details).

Table I : Bidar District Cropping Pattern*

1993-96

(In hectares)

| Year | Paddy | Sorghum (Jola) | Millet (Sajji) | Wheat (Godhi) | Other Cereals | Kadle | Thogri (Tur) | Other Pulses |
|---------|-------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|-------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1993-94 | 18010 | 131043 | 12827 | 6133 | 2135 | 26099 | 44801 | 98765 |
| 1994-95 | 15656 | 19953 | 12811 | 6757 | - | 31742 | 48506 | 103144 |
| 1995-96 | 10218 | 12678 | 15110 | 6973 | - | 40342 | 48946 | 105432 |

*Source: Compiled from District Statistical Handbook, 1993-94, 1994-95, 1995-96.

But, despite inadequate infrastructure and overall conditions of mass poverty, the region has been able to increase its production of *tur* cultivation. This is observable in the fact that yield rates of pulses were the highest in Bidar district (711 kgs/hectare) compared to the state average of only 477 kgs per hectare.¹³ As a result, since 1996 Gulbarga and Bidar districts account for 75 percent of *tur* cultivation in the state.

The introduction and promotion of modern agriculture result in the development of two key and striking contradictions in the region. Perhaps the most significant contradiction of this is that while there is an alteration in the very foundations and orientations of agricultural cultivation (in the type of crops cultivated, in the new seed varieties, new inputs, etc.), there is little or no change in the social bases of the agrarian society. That is, though there is an alteration in the physical conduct of agriculture (in the types of crops grown, the cultivation patterns etc.,) it is not matched by any alteration in the ownership patterns of the agrarian society in which the new agriculture is introduced. Though largely a dry cultivation belt with a predominance of small cultivators, there is a schism in the patterns of land ownership. An overview of land-ownership patterns in the district will highlight this.

¹³ Government of Karnataka; Report on Area, Production and Productivity and Prices of Agricultural Crops in Karnataka (1995-96).

Currently, only 17 percent of the district's agriculturists can be considered to be large landowners with holding sizes of between four and ten hectares (see Appendix II: for data on land-holdings). Thirty-six percent of agriculturists are marginal cultivators with holdings that range from 2-4 hectares. About 45 percent are small cultivators who own land that range from 1-2 hectares.¹⁴ While the absence of very large holdings by a smaller proportion of persons is to be seen as an advantage (only about two percent of the holdings are more than ten hectares), it is important to note that data indicates a continual fragmentation of landholdings. In 1971, the single largest category of land-holdings was of that between 5-10 hectares and the average size of land holding was 6.2 hectares.¹⁵ But, currently (1996 data), the average size of holding is only 2.8 hectares¹⁶ and a majority of cultivators are those who own less than two hectares of land. While such units cannot be assessed to be uneconomic in terms of mere size,¹⁷ the operators of such units face other problems.

Given the declining size of landholdings, many small and marginal cultivators resort to renting or share-cropping.

¹⁴All data compiled from District Statistical Handbook (1995-96) and NABARD report on Bidar, (1996)

¹⁵Bidar District Gazetteer, Government Press, Bangalore. 1977.

¹⁶NABARD report on Bidar (1996).

¹⁷Economic Anthropology has, typically, disputed neo-classical economic arguments that consider size to be a key factor in productivity. In terms of assessing agricultural productivity in relation to size they have argued and indicated the extent to which small parcels of landholding are utilised to maximum capacity and are thereby to be considered to be economically viable units.

Sharecropping in the region is known as *lavani* and there are about four different kinds of *lavani* arrangements that prevail in the region.¹⁸ Insecurity of land lease, increasing production costs, inadequate returns from production, and problems in accessing and receiving credit are some of the problems that most small and marginal cultivators and *lavani* holders face. Though such arrangements are not conducive to economic development, the state has not actively sought to provide security of tenure to these share-croppers. This is evident in the fact that though tenancy is legally abolished¹⁹ there have been no attempts to actually prevent sharecropping or to ensure transfer of titles to sharecroppers.

Of the poorer sections of the rural community it is only the labouring class, mostly the landless and low-ranked caste groups and members of scheduled castes, that has, only recently, seen a slight improvement in life conditions. Linked to the fact that commercial agriculture, without high and extensive mechanization, increases labour demands (especially for weeding, harvesting), real wages have increased.²⁰ In addition, there has been some amount of collective political

¹⁸The four types of *Lavani* are: (1) a share-cropper pays a certain amount to the landowner and retains all crops and produce from the fields, (2) a share-cropper incurs all production expenses and gives half the produce to the landowner, (3) the owner and share-cropper share all the production costs and then share the produce at harvest, (4) the share-cropper incurs all the expenses and gives one-third of the total produce to the landowner.

¹⁹Vide Karnataka Land Reform Act 1974.

²⁰Government of Karnataka: Report on Area, Production, Productivity and Prices of Agriculture Crops. 1997-98.

mobilization and organization among them as organisations such as the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti have been active in the region. Many of the labouring classes are now aware of the stipulated minimum wages, of their rights to receive ration cards and the rations with it and of other benefits that accrue to them.

Within this context, of relatively little or no change in the economic opportunities and social structures of resource allocation, the promotion of a model of agriculture that is largely dependent on external inputs and the market has implications for the life conditions of the cultivators. Agriculturists trade low-risk, low productive agriculture (typical of agriculture in dry regions) for a high productivity but also high-risk form of agriculture. Yet, such an engagement with the agriculture places cultivators in a position of vulnerability, in which neither the agency that promotes this form of agriculture (the state) nor the sources (the market forces) that drive it support them in their times of distress.

Capital and Market in an Agrarian Community

In addition to the role of the state in initiating changes and retaining certain social features in the region, it is important to delineate and understand the role of capital and the market in impacting on the life conditions of the people in the region. Though modern agriculture requires inputs (seeds, fertilisers,

pesticides, technology etc), much of the capital needed to purchase these inputs is not easily available to a majority of people. As the NABARD report for Bidar indicates, only large landowners are considered to be credit worthy and most institutional credit caters to their requirements. Most small and marginal cultivators, especially sharecroppers, are considered to be "credit unworthy" and are bypassed by institutional credit agencies.²¹

Two factors are accountable for such conditions. One is the general lack of credit made available to rural and agricultural credit institutions. From 1987 to 1992, the RBI has reduced credit availability to agricultural sectors from 19.1 percent to 11.7 percent.²² As a result there is a credit crunch in the agricultural credit institutions which typically meet 67 percent of short-term loans and 37 percent of long-term loans in rural areas. This combines with the fact that there are sharp fluctuations in agricultural production and loan recovery rates are poor. As the NABARD report for Bidar details, loan recovery rates in the district are poor, standing between only 24 percent for co-operative banks and between 27 to 30 percent for commercial banks.²³ Low recovery rates further discourage the entry of additional credit into the region and lead to the marking of most small and marginal cultivators as being credit unworthy.

²¹NABARD, Potential Linked Plan, Bidar, Karnataka (Annual PLP for 1997-98), NABARD Regional Office, Bangalore.

²²*Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol xxxii, (40) Oct3-9, 1998.

²³NABARD, Potential Linked Plan, Bidar District.

A striking result of the lack of credit availability to small and marginal cultivators, in a context of demanding commercial inputs by modern agricultural methods, is that there is a mushrooming of non-institutional credit sources. Most of these non-institutional creditors are located in the towns of the district and in the villages. While a survey of the actual types and backgrounds of moneylenders in the region was difficult to conduct,²⁴ the presence and impact of two new sources of credit were evident.

The first of these are the groups of families that have either benefited from commercial agriculture and or families with members who are employed in the urban sectors. Members of older, established landowning families, who have with the support of access to land, capital and technical advice reaped benefits from commercial agriculture, seek to utilise their surplus capital as usury. While moneylending by these households and family has always been part of the rural economy, it has now increased with the additional flow of funds that many of these households have. Urban remittances and surplus capital are ploughed into local money lending outfits, which, with the government stipulation to be registered, call themselves "Financial Corporations". The presence and impact of these financial corporations is visible in the fact that

²⁴ I approached the District's Office of the Registrar of Co-operatives and Moneylenders for data. However, they were reluctant and refused to share the data immediately. My request to have the necessary data (in terms of number of financial corporations, moneylenders etc., for a period of ten years) mailed has been ignored.

in even small villages there are shops and houses that have boards indicating that they are “financial corporations”. For instance, in the village of Murambi which has only 240 households there are nine “financial corporations” with members drawn from different caste groups. Lending rates in these agencies are between 40 to 50 percent per annum (as compared to the average of 17 to 23 percent at most institutional credit agencies). Most cultivators who are unable to procure loans from co-operatives or banks depend on these agencies for agricultural and non-agricultural monetary requirements.

The second source of credit in the region is that of the agri-input agencies themselves.²⁵ Agents for large and small scale agri-input manufacturing industries not only sell fertilisers, pesticides, seeds, equipment and other agricultural requirements but also double up as creditors by linking sales of these inputs with credit. Manufacturers permit high interest rates by printing high MRPs (maximum retail price) on the items to be sold. It is left to the discretion and skills of the agent/distributor to sell the goods and retrieve the loans from the people. The availability of agri-inputs on credit acts as an incentive for most people to purchase these items.

²⁵ Clive Bell documents the presence and impact of the new agricultural traders in the credit market of rural India. He however, contests government claims that there has been a decline in the number of professional moneylenders. He links the integration of agricultural trading activities by moneylenders as camouflaging their presence (See Bell, “Interactions between Institutional and Informal Credit Agencies in Rural India” In *The Economics of Rural Organizations: Theory, Practice and Politics*, eds., Karla Hoff, Avisham Braverman and Joseph Stiglitz. World Bank. 1993.

In addition to the binding of cultivators through agri-input sales and credit, many agents also act as grain procurers. Having purchased inputs on credit, cultivators are often forced to sell their produce to these agencies, at prices that are below market rates, in order to clear their debts. While cultivators, as buyers and clients, are enforced to submit to the dictates of the market they do not have the same leverage as sellers of their produce. Sharp fluctuations in prices, as observed in the decline in prices for *tur* in 1998, increased costs of production without assured and commensurate procurement prices are trends that mark the economic life of cultivators.

In the establishment and entrenchment of such agencies in the region there is little or no state regulation or supervision. Though pesticide dealers and agents are required to have licences and be registered, many agents and distributors in the villages are not licensed. Cultivators speak of the large-scale dilution of pesticides and the lack of guarantee of many commercial seed varieties.²⁶ Sales of spurious seeds and pesticides remain an issue that many cultivators allege and which the state has yet to verify.

Compounding such problems, linked to the inputs required for commercial agriculture, is also the problem of knowledge

²⁶Despite widespread opinions that many of the commercial seeds and pesticides are spurious, there has been no measure to either verify this or to bring to the public's notice those companies or brands which are unreliable for production.

or agricultural know-how dissemination. Though the practice of commercial agriculture is promoted formally by the government through its agencies such as the Dept. of Agriculture and the Agriculture Extension Service and is largely backed by the promotion of commercial inputs by the agri-business agencies themselves, there are problems in the dissemination of knowledge. Though all village panchayats of the district are assigned a gram sevaka or agricultural assistant, contact between the agricultural assistants and the cultivators is not always assured. Most agricultural assistants maintain contacts and good rapport with only large landowners, sharing with them information about new seeds, pesticides, fertilisers and indicating ways in which to use the new inputs. In addition to this limited contact and supervision, much of the instructions for the use of agri-inputs (such as fertilisers, pesticides and seeds) are only in English and in some cases in Hindi. While a large proportion of cultivators are illiterate, even those literate in the regional and local languages, in this case Kannada and Urdu respectively, are unable to comprehend the instructions and directions for the use of these inputs.

This limited contact between agricultural agents and small and marginal cultivators has its effect on agricultural conditions. Agricultural practices also alter within a context of informal dissemination of knowledge and imitation. Cultivators integrate new methods and new inputs through observing others and with little or no formal instruction in the details of using the

new inputs. This haphazard dissemination of agricultural knowledge and practices lends itself to problems in the context of crises situations. This was evident in the discussion relating to the use of pesticides at the time of the outbreak of the *heliotesis* epidemic. Members of the agricultural Extension Service observe that cultivators did not spray their fields on time when the pests were in the larvae stage and then took to rampant and excessive spraying when the pests had reached the fourth stage of maturation and were not susceptible to control by pesticides. However, cultivators indicate the absence of agricultural extension personnel in the field and the lack of instruction on how to handle a situation such as the outbreak of the *heliotesis* pest. The resulting gap in knowledge dissemination meant that cultivators not only lost a sizeable proportion of crops but also incurred large sums of debt. Such a situation calls attention to the problem of knowledge dissemination. While local knowledge and locally appropriate practices are being displaced, the spread of a new form of agriculture is not based on ensuring the proper dissemination and practice of new knowledge. Rather, cultivators receive and disseminate knowledge of the new practices and inputs in a rather *ad hoc* manner leading to confusion and even stress during periods of crises.

The result of such economic, ecological and social changes and their devastating impact on the local community was evident in the situation that developed in the agricultural seasons of 1997-98.

The Agricultural Season of 1997-98 and the Onset of Agrarian Distress

The agricultural season of 1997-98 (between the months of June 1997 to July 1998) illustrates the conditions that prevail in the region. In the summer cultivation period, rainfall was deficit²⁷ and as a result there was a substantial decline in production. However, the winter cultivation season saw excess rains, about 153 millimetres when the average expected rainfall for the period is only 19 millimetres.²⁸ The climatic conditions of long periods of cloud cover and moisture provided the right conditions for an outbreak of pests. The standing crops, predominantly that of *tur*, were attacked by *heliotesis*, a pest that reproduces three generations in a one-year cycle and which is difficult to control.²⁹ In attempting to bring the pests under control and to salvage the remaining crops, cultivators resorted to purchasing (mostly on credit) pesticides and rampantly and frequently spraying their fields. Yet, by the end of the season, February 1998, almost 80 percent of the *tur* crops were destroyed (See Table: II)

²⁷Rainfall recorded: 843 mm while the average expected is 890 mm (Taluka Agricultural Office: Bhalki)

²⁸Taluka Agricultural Office (Bhalki)

²⁹Taluka Agricultural office, interview with the Assistant Director (Bhalki). *Heliotesis* is also called *helicoverpa*.

TABLE II

Extent of Crop Loss in Some Important Crops in Bidar *
(all estimates)

| Crop | Cropping (in HA) | Total Cropping Loss (in HA) | Loss in Production (in Rs. Lakhs) | Loss of Tonnage | Percentage Crop Loss |
|----------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------|-------------------------|
| TUR | 49980 | 39984 | 1919 | 19191 | 80 |
| JOWAR | 35850 | 24968 | 747 | 12472 | 71 |
| BENGAL GRAM | 48035 | 27315 | 817 | 8193 | 60 |
| SUN FLOWER | 9636 | 6919 | 155 | 1946 | 71 |

*Joint Legislative Committee Enquiry Report (Government of Karnataka)

The loss of crops for two successive seasons can only have been devastating for a region that is already poor. Not only were crops meant for commercial sale lost, but the production and storage of the local staple crop, sorghum or *jola* from the region was eroded. Having taken to the cultivation of pulses on a large scale, there was a significant decline in the cultivation of cereals, including that of sorghum. Declining area under cereal production met with two years of rainfall fluctuations and sharp decreases of crop production. The result meant that by August 1998, when we visited the area, local sorghum was not available. Many people were resorting to purchasing sorghum from stores, which did not suit their palates and which, as many people indicated, was rotten. As a result, many of the local people had stopped consuming

sorghum and had switched to consuming wheat *rotis*. While this loss of staple food, with its attending cultural significance, is a telling comment on the food security of the region, it was the indebtedness of the marginal and small cultivators that triggered the sense of distress. Not only were a majority of cultivators in deep indebtedness but also the lack of local and external support compounded their distress. It was in this context that in some households the main earning members or heads of households, many who had incurred large debts, resorted to suicide.

Profile of Persons Who Committed Suicide

Based on a compilation of data made available by various reports,³⁰ the following table provides an overview of the economic conditions of those persons who committed suicide.

Even a cursory glance at the table on details of those who committed suicide will indicate that many were *lavani* holders with fairly substantial debts. The debts were primarily to private financial/lending agencies which implies not only higher interest rates but also more social and cultural pressure on these debtors. The weather fluctuations of the past two years (1996-98), and the resulting crop-loss, had increased the indebtedness of cultivators. Many who borrowed did so not

³⁰Newspapers reported sporadically on the suicides and there are discrepancies in the total number of suicides reported by them.

only for production purposes, but to also subsist. The non-availability of non-agricultural employment and institutional credit compounded the economic hardships of many.

TABLE III

Economic Profile of Persons who Committed Suicide*

| | Name | Village | Lavani Holder | Debt (Rs) | | Own Lands (Acres) |
|----|--------------------------|--------------|---------------|------------|-----------|-------------------|
| | | | | Co-op Bank | Private | |
| 1 | Mr. Shivraj Mainalle | Siddeshwara | Yes | 24,000 | 75-80,000 | 2.32 |
| 2 | Mr. Prabhu | Kasarthugaon | Yes | 15,000 | 60,000 | 6 |
| 3 | Ms. Lakshmibai | Suldabk | N/A | N/A | 10,000 | N/A |
| 4 | Mr. Pandarinath | Hajnala | Yes | N/A | N/A | 1 |
| 5 | Mr. Dhanraj | Lada | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| 6 | Mr. Bhimrao | Bemalakeda | Yes | N/A | N/A | 2.15 |
| 7 | Mr. Vaman | Ghatbarole | Yes | 65,000 | 30,000 | 3 |
| 8 | Ms. Bijabai | Maurambi | No | 60,000 | N/A | 14 |
| 9 | Mr. Bharat | Alahalli | N/A | N/A | N/A | 18 |
| 10 | Mr. Basavaraj | Chondi | No | N/A | N/A | 14 |
| 11 | Mr. Bhojaraj Dholabba | Bhatramba | Yes | N/A | 50,000 | 4 |
| 12 | Mr. Basappa Balkeshwara@ | Kelvadi | N/A | N/A | N/A | No |
| 13 | Mr. Dilip+ | Kunte Sirsi | N/A | 100,000 | N/A | 5+shop |

* Compiled from interviews in villages, Joint Legislative Committee report and newspaper reports

@ Considered to have died from snake-bite

+ Considered to have died from excessive alcohol consumption

While there may be slight variations in the case history of each person who committed suicide and his/her household and family situation, their situation is representative of the larger and more pervading despair and despondency that has set in among the agriculturists in the district. A description of one of the villages, Siddheshwara, which we visited, will provide a scenario of the region and the life conditions of the people there.

Siddheshwara – a temple-based village of about six hundred households with a population of approximately four thousand people – is perhaps quite typical of villages in the district. Its clutter of thatch, stone and mortar houses are linked by narrow by-lanes, which now with the onset of the monsoon are run with water, sewage, excreta and cow-dung. The temple of Siddheshwara looms large over the village and the new Basava statue, installed by the members of the local Rashtriya Basava Dal³¹ marks the entry of the village and the temple. Despondency seems to be the ruling tone; poor climate, failed crops, an inefficient local government, an indifferent state apparatus. The men list their problems with ease – “the rains are unpredictable, for the past two years the winter or *rabi*

³¹The Rashtriya Basava Dal is an organisation of Lingayats that seeks to regain the religious and social heritage of *Virashaivism*. In the region it is the most visible and dominant caste-based organisation and is responsible for the mobilisation of many youth into its wings and has become the model for other castes to organise themselves. Other caste and religion based organisations in the region are that of the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti, the Gondeshwara Sangha of the Kurubas or the shepherds and the Tairik Muslim Sabha.

rains have arrived at the time of harvest. Unseasonal rains have destroyed crops and the outbreak of pests has increased. The pesticides are ineffective, though vast quantities of pesticides are bought and sprayed. The pests and crop diseases have claimed the fields. Government compensation for crop loss is both inadequate and inefficient. How can a person who has lost several thousand rupees per hectare be compensated with a few hundred rupees? Worse still, the amount that is offered as compensation and the process to procure it is an insult. The government has disbursed cheques for sums so paltry that it does not even cover the cost of the bus charge required to encash the cheques at the district or taluka headquarters. Credit is hard to obtain...most people take loans from local creditors. For close to two years now there is little or no income. With increased costs of cultivation, many cultivators have incurred large debts only to be unable to repay them. What are the alternatives?"

Under such conditions, of changing agricultural practices, minimal state and administrative support, increasing subordination to market forces, high risks in agriculture and declining community support, it is not hard to imagine the personal distress that cultivators experience. In an agrarian community, with a long history of drought-related crop loss and scarcity, it is not just the loss of crops that has created tensions. Rather, it is the experience of crop-loss in a context of *significantly altered form of agriculture and community*

relations that accounts for distress among people. As the new form of agriculture links cultivators to the larger economy and market, it compounds the schisms within the local community. Commercial agriculture with its emphasis on increased commercial inputs and capital means the conduct of agriculture on an individual and household bases. Moving away from agricultural patterns that were more or less similar across households (in terms of type of crops, patterns of cultivation, knowledge base etc.), agriculture is now primarily an independent, household or family enterprise with more links between each cultivator and the market than among cultivators themselves. Successful cultivators, primarily those with larger landholdings and with access to capital, are able to withdraw into their own enclaves. Under such conditions, variations in agricultural practices also mean variations in the degree and type of crop production or crop loss, which itself is experienced on a separate household/family basis. *It is this, the loss of the collective³² and locally-bound characteristic of agriculture with the increasing subordination of agriculture to market, capital, and external know-how that lends to its practice new forms of distress.* Crop loss now is not uniformly experienced by all cultivators, and for those who are subject to it, in addition to the attending effects of impoverishment, there is the stigma and loss of honour attached to being indebted and penurious.

³² In characterising local, pre-commercial, agriculture as "collective" I do not connote it to have equity in terms of resources for all cultivators. Rather, the collective dimension of pre-commercial agriculture is to be noted in the similarity of production type, pattern, orientation, risk, and productivity levels among all cultivating units.

The case of Shri Shivaraj Mainalle, of Siddheswara village illustrates this. He was a man of about 45 years with five children, the oldest of whom was in the 6th standard. He owned about 2.32 acres and was a sharecropper or *lavani* holder for another six acres or so. For the past two years he had lost all crops, due to a combination of weather fluctuations and the outbreak of pests. His debts had mounted; by the end of 1997 he owed about Rs 24, 000 to the local co-operative bank and some Rs. 80,000 to private moneylenders. He is reported to have spent atleast 20,000 rupees on pesticides alone. In this period of distress, his creditor, reportedly, asked him to return his money. Shri Shivraj Mainalle committed suicide in December 1997.

'Friends of Friends, Enemy of Enemies'

The most popular brand of pesticide sold in the region is *endosulphan*.³³ Its advertisement jingle, "friend of friends, enemy of enemies" can provide the epigram with which one can contextualise the impact of agri-business and commercial agriculture in the region. This is pertinent in the context of the devastation that has been wrought on the people to ask, "who have been the friends and who the enemies of cultivators in this region?"

³³Endosulphan is reportedly banned in most of the western countries (see *Farmers' Suicides in Andhra Pradesh: Report of the People's Tribunal*. Raithu Sahaya Committee, Hyderabad. July 1998).

Distress in rural India is often recognised only at end periods of prolonged suffering, when hunger, loss of production and destitution become either publicised or politicised events. Government machinery is largely geared towards addressing scarcity situations, linked primarily to providing relief based on indicators of distress. Food, fodder and water scarcity are considered to be reliable indicators of distress. Even conditions such as these require political will for the administration to intervene. But conditions such as those that prevail in Bidar do not fall into the bureaucratic norms and regulations of assessing and providing assistance.

Similarly, the understanding of distress in the region has been limited. Newspaper reports have, largely, seen it as individual cases of suicide;³⁴ some have questioned the claims of families to be compensated, others have assumed reports of such suicides to be opportunistic cases in which families sought to present suicides from personal reasons as suicides from crop-loss so as to receive government compensation. Few reports and analyses have actually linked agricultural conditions in the region to the policies of the state and the subordination of cultivators to the market.³⁵ The largely de-contextualised and

³⁴For example, some newspaper reports that seem to question the authenticity of these suicides as linked to crop loss are those in the Deccan Herald, June 6, 1998 and Times of India, March 14, 1998

³⁵For Karnataka the report by some students of the National Law School University of India has highlighted the role of the state in leading to suicides (Nandan Kamath et al., *The Plight of Farmers in Bidar*. Assignment for Law, Property and Development, National Law School University of India, Bangalore, 1998.

piece-meal approach adopted in the coverage of suicides in these regions is representative of the wide chasm between the lives of rural, agrarian residents and the urban orientation of most reporters.

The Joint Legislative Enquiry Committee, set up by the Government of Karnataka, has submitted its report,³⁶ which notes most cases of suicides to be linked to crop-loss and indebtedness. In recognition of such crop-loss the report recommends monetary compensation to be paid to those families whose members have, as a result of experiencing crop-loss and faced with high indebtedness, committed suicide. The report does not focus on the larger factors, especially those of widespread usury in the region, problems with the promotion of commercial agriculture, poor infrastructure development of the region etc., which have combined to produce such conditions and in which suicides have been the most glaring result.

More recently, there have been calls from certain sectors of the government to send psychiatrists to the region. Resorting to psychological arguments is to deny the social and economic bases of such distress. More specifically, psychological arguments help deflect attention from the deep-rooted problems

³⁶Joint Legislative Committee Report on Inquiry into suicides by Farmers in Karnataka due to Crop-Loss. (April 24th, 1998) Karnataka Vidhana Sabha Secretariat. Vidhana Soudha, Bangalore-560001.

in the content, orientation, implementation and impact of economic policies. By remaining oblivious to the conditions of pervasive poverty, deprivation and collective disablement of the people, the state is laying grounds for a repeat of such distress. The state must recognise that it has been the key promoter of such an agricultural model in the region and thereby bears an onus in alleviating the risks associated with such a type of agriculture.

Distress in Bidar, of which the recent spate of suicides are only symptomatic, has resulted from a combination of crises; ecological, economic and social. Agricultural policies that overlook the ecological specificity of the region and the retention of inequitable social structures form the bedrock in producing such distress. The subordination of cultivators to market and capital forces without any safety net to support them in times of crop-loss accounts for the devastation of rural communities. Just as the suicides are symptoms of the pervasive distress in the region, the government needs to take the loss of staple food grains in the region as a serious issue. As Susan George elaborates in her book, *Ill Fares the Land*;³⁷ the loss of staple grains in any specific region without a substantial alternative economic base indicates a threat to the food security and hence the sustainability of local communities. Any intervention must seek to address these factors and not

³⁷Susan George, *Ill Fares the Land: Essays on Food, Hunger and Power*. Writers and Readers: London. 1985.

attempt to provide temporary relief such as nominal monetary compensation. It would only be fair to recognise that the victims of agrarian distress in the district are not only those who have committed suicide and their family members but also those who continue to live there, believing, as do most cultivators, that they have an obligation to the land, to the community, to the state and to the nation to continue to cultivate the land.

Suggestions

1. Promote Alternative Agriculture that is Ecologically Appropriate and Sensitive.

The state must review its agricultural policies and programmes, especially those in which agricultural practices are promoted without attention to their ecological drawbacks. The retention of some dry cultivation patterns with slight modifications, the promotion of use of local, organic seeds, and cultivation patterns that can bypass chemical fertilisers and pesticides are practices that are available and which must be promoted. In dry areas, where agricultural production is more susceptible to climatic variations, the state must encourage research that makes an assessment and forecast of such climatic shifts. Agricultural practices that are primarily suitable to the local ecology and which provide a sustainable livelihood level to all people should be made.

2. Initiate and Encourage Co-operative Agricultural Units

As data for land holdings indicate, most of the holdings in the district fall below the four hectares range. Only 17 percent of holdings are those of above ten hectares. Such a pattern of land holding should be the foundation for the state to promote co-operative agricultural units. Pooling in land and labour with inputs purchased through co-operative capital can be the solution to negating the high risks that most cultivators take. Current agricultural policy promotes commercial agriculture in which only those who have substantial land and capital are able to be successful. Organising for co-operative agriculture must be taken seriously and all endeavours must be directed towards this. In organising collective units for production, the state can also organise these units to handle and manage crises situations, such as those that result from shifts in climatic patterns or during outbreaks of pests.

3. Regulate Agri-business and Non-institutional Credit Agencies

The state must regulate agri-business agencies in terms of the quality of goods sold and their links of credit to sales of goods. A proliferation of such agencies, with no accountability is the single most important factor for misleading and then degrading the lives of agriculturists. Stringent registration and regular inspection of such agencies must be part of the state's role in supporting the interests of cultivators.

4. Improve Development Infrastructure in the Region

Bidar district is in dire need of infrastructure development. Its irrigation projects must be completed and non-agricultural industries and employment generating programmes need to be promoted. Promotion of some handicraft industries such as Bidri ware and other local handicrafts is one solution. Better roads and communication facilities will also improve marketing. More investment in educational and health infrastructure and services will help boost the general social development of the region.

5. Broadbase Agricultural Knowledge Dissemination

If the agricultural department is to play a key role in the promotion of certain agricultural practices, then it also bears an onus to ensure that complete knowledge relating to all the dimensions of new agricultural practices is reached to the people. A more ecologically sensitive form of agriculture can be promoted. Agricultural Agents and the extension service must also be geared to addressing situations of distress and initiate actions that can be adopted by all. Dissemination of know-how and contra-indication of pesticides must be printed in the local language in a simple and accessible format.

APPENDIX I

Details of Villages Visited

I. Maurambi: Bhalki taluka:

| | |
|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Population | : 900 |
| Households | : 275 |
| Banks/Co-operatives | : Nil |
| Financial Corporations | : 9 |
| Schools | : Primary and Middle (Govt) |

II. Siddheshwara: Bhalki taluka

| | |
|------------------------|--------|
| Population | : 4000 |
| Households | : 600 |
| Banks | : Nil |
| Co-operatives | : 2 |
| Financial Corporations | : Nil |

III. Nittur: Bhalki taluka

| | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Population | : 3599 |
| Households | : 715 |
| Banks | : 1 |
| Co-operatives | : 1 |
| Financial Corporations | : 3 |
| Pesticide and Manure Outlets | : 3 |
| Schools | : 3 primary; 2 high; 1 Pre-university |

APPENDIX II

Bidar District Agricultural Land Holdings*

| | LESS THAN ONE HECTARES | | 1-2 HECTARES | | 2-4 HECTARES | | 4-10 HECTARES | | 10 HECT & ABOVE | |
|---------|------------------------------|-------|-----------------|-------|-----------------|--------|------------------|--------|--------------------|-------|
| YEAR | NO. | HECT. | NO. | HECT. | NO. | HECT | NO. | HECT. | NO. | HECT. |
| 1996-97 | 22054 | 14195 | 63486 | 94157 | 50929 | 138795 | 24329 | 145466 | 5229 | 72948 |

* Source: District at a Glance 1996-97

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